The Optimum Conditions for Foreign Language Learning in Primary Education

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to review the primary language learning situation in Europe and shed light on the benefits it carries. Early language learning is the biggest policy development in education and has developed in rapid speed over the past 30 years; this article considers the effects and advantages of the optimum condition of an early start, the objective of which is to reinforce the European education scene. Keywords: early language learning, language education policy, professional development

INTRODUCTION

In order to facilitate communication and interaction, strategies and promote co-operation, mobility, trade and the European economy, language learning is essential. However, English has overwhelmed the need to become a native speaker of Foreign Language Learners (FLL) across Europe in recent years (EACEA, 2008). The developing interest in early language learning is a matter of fact. More and more children are now learning languages at primary level. The selection of a particular early language learning model is allegedly decided by a combination of aspects, such as “the time available for language learning, perceived and realised intensity, material and financial input, starting age, social and geographical settings, as well as the language competence of the teacher” (Edeleson et al., 2006: 14).

This paper will review concepts of the early language education practice and the effective policies that could bring out the advantages of early language instruction to the surface. The main aim is to shed light on the benefits of language learning when implementation is handled in such a manner that children and teachers can enjoy its positive outcomes.

THE LANGUAGE LEARNING BACKGROUND WITHIN EUROPE

Early foreign language learning has a priority within the European Union. National governments throughout Europe, government agencies and Ministries of Education are committed to promoting the concept nationwide. The commitment to the early commencement of language learning and multilingualism (reiterated in the European Commission’s White Paper, 1995) and the development of life-long learning as a vital concept in Europe’s educational process may lead to a language learning at a point of great interest amongst governmental programmes and actions.

According to EACEA (2008), in many European countries, the notion of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at primary schools, implies relatively limited amounts of time per week (from one to two hours). Nevertheless highly fluent nor specialise in language learning, there is a goal of developing an initial competence. However, the situation seems to be steadily improving in various countries (ELLIE, 2011). Even though the plan of including a foreign language in the primary curriculum is beneficial since it entails a global perspective, parents, teachers and other adults in various cultures assist overcoming prejudice and discrimination. Great complexity can occur due to diverse approaches, views and aims. There may well be an ideal scenario in terms of the age of the child, the allocation of time and the skill of the teacher “but if we are to succeed in giving primary children benefits of MFL, we have to be realistic and accept that practice has to be shaped by actual circumstances”. This focal point is worth discussing since early language learning in many countries practice the Foreign Language (FL) within the limits of the classroom. The European Commission Action Plan 2004-2006 has recommended that “member states should move towards ensuring that foreign language learning at primary school should be effective” (Commission of the European Communities, 2003:7) and it is essential that the learning process be handled in such a way that it will benefit children learning languages. There are European countries that are characterised by top-down research projects, in which decision-makers have aimed to develop appropriate curriculum programmes for young learners and have traditionally wanted to gain insights, whereas, in other European countries, the notion of foreign language learning to be produced as a result of pressure from parents, politicians and/or other interested parties. Lessons may be obligatory upon schools and carried out with minimal supervision and control from educational authorities (Nikolou & Curtain, 2005). There is no doubt that the trend of an early start is more complicated than some may acknowledge. What makes it so complex is not just teaching practices and the methodology used in the language classroom, or any debate about the most appropriate age to begin learning an FL, but the fact that behind the linguistic exterior hide political and sociocultural perspectives, which influence the success or failure of the lesson. Enneer and Moon (2009), have stated that political demands and changes of leadership can influence or change stable policy formation and continuity. The questions we must prompt ourselves to ask are, whether these perspectives include pedagogical language learning methods that would really equip children for the future and benefit their present, and how political and socio-cultural perspectives affect the progress of early language learning in many countries.

THE EFL POLICY AND OPTIMUM STARTING AGE

Despite the increasing interest in early language learning, there continue to be discussions and debates regarding the appropriate starting age and the necessary conditions for success. Early attempts of foreign language instruction are often based on the claim that “younger is better”, that the child is likely to prevail in competency because of the younger age, and that young learners will have greater opportunities to become fluent in a foreign language even though they may have started learning it well into adulthood. Singleton and Ron (2004) reach the conclusion that “it is not the case that younger children absorb the knowledge in grappling L2 grammar, syntax and morphology where young learners are outperformed (Ekstrand, 1976). Moon (2005) suggests that the claim of ‘younger is better’ can be considered controversial, since there is evidence that adolescents and adults benefit from learning a foreign language. However, she argues that children have the advantage of having sensitivity to pronunciation. Pinter (2006:29) supports this argument and in his favour the position that children hold an “intuitive grasp of language and their ability to be more at an advantage with languages and enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation” (Driscoll and Frost, 1999) explain that young learners have an advantage in terms of imitation, sensitivity and dexterity, compared to older language learners. Nonetheless, there is a risk of not being given the opportunity to use this instinct if their teachers lack in fluency. On the other hand, Edeleson et al. (2006), claim that an optimum starting age has not yet been established. An early start to language learning can offer the child an overall longer period of learning and a prospective influence in their personal development whilst in a formative stage. Nonetheless, an early start is unlikely to make a spectacular difference. Children have more chances of becoming successful and motivated language learners if they take part in language learning at an early stage. Starting age and enthusiasm and benefit their language learning. It can easily be seen that a teacher who lacks confidence and fluency in the language is unlikely to be able to set up the best atmosphere for the child. The young learners experience a certain level of understanding, a conflict, which becomes more complicated as time passes. The young learners experience a certain level of understanding, a conflict, which becomes more complicated as time passes. The young learners experience a certain level of understanding, a conflict, which becomes more complicated as time passes. The young learners experience a certain level of understanding, a conflict, which becomes more complicated as time passes.
superior is in their ability to imitate a pronunciation model, as previously mentioned. There is a strong case, therefore, to ensure that the models available are acceptable ones. Secondly, without adequate opportunities to engage in genuine interaction with other users of the foreign language, another capacity of young language learning will go to waste.

Teachers have the responsibility of providing major language input to young language learners. It is necessary for language education of this age group to have interactive skills with the purpose of introducing activity-based and interactive methods, as well as the appropriate teaching strategies that will generate interest in learning. According to Moon (2005), these methods are more appropriate for teaching children a foreign language. An early phase of appropriate language instruction can equip children with a positive outlook, so the methods in question need to be compatible with their linguistic and cognitive levels. Children are more than capable of learning a foreign language, however, depending on the age factor alone can be a risk with negative outcomes. According to Moon (2005: 5):

[...] there are many other important factors to consider when deciding whether to begin English early. Unless you have enough time, appropriate materials and curriculum, well trained and competent teachers, there is a high risk that very little is gained by starting younger and quite a lot lost in terms of resources, maybe frustrated teachers and young learners who get demotivated early and yet know they have to continue with English into secondary school.

CONCLUSION

This paper was meant to present a review of the theoretical perspectives of the optimum starting age of FLL and the optimum conditions that would provide great value to language education within the context of Europe. One could argue that there is no empirical evidence which proves that an early start is better than a later one (Nikolov, 2002), however an early start alone is not sufficient to bring about the benefits of an early start and lead young language learners to a successful outcome. As Nikolov (2000) has argued, it is important to set realistic goals for the implementation of early language education. If the early language learning programmes are not well planned and realized, the integration of FL would not be successful. Finally, it is essential to emphasize the teacher’s role in the success of early language programmes. It is necessary that primary language teachers undergo the necessary training in order to be able to apply relevant classroom techniques, which will motivate and intrigue their young learners. If certain measures are not met, the funds and efforts of integrating languages in the primary curriculum could be lost.

REFERENCES


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